

From Psychology in Buddhism to Buddhist Psychology: A Critical Review of Methodological Basis

Ven. Karandagolle Wijithatissa¹, Ven. Nelliwala Meththananda²

Introduction

Psychology is generally defined as the scientific study of mental processes and behavior. In the modern academic context, psychology is not only concerned with theoretical explanations about the mind and behavior, but also with systematic methodology for studying mental processes, emotions, behavior, personality, well-being, etc. From this perspective, any attempt to present a body of knowledge as “psychology” requires not only theoretical explanations but also a methodological basis.

Buddhist teachings are rich in psychological values. The Buddha’s teaching gives central attention to the human mind, the causes of suffering, craving, attachment, intention, moral behavior, mental cultivation, and liberation. Concepts such as *citta* (mind), *vedanā* (feeling), *saññā* (perception), *sankhāra* (mental formations), *taṇhā* (craving), *kilesa* (defilements), *dukkha* (suffering), *yoniso manasikāra* (wise attention), *sati* (mindfulness), *Mettā* (loving-kindness), *Karuṇā* (compassion), *Muditā* (equanimity), and *viraga* (non-attachment) have clear psychological relevance. Scholars such as De Silva (2005) and Kalupahana (1987) have shown that Buddhist teachings contain deep insights into cognition, emotion, motivation, personality transformation, and mental well-being. Similarly, works by Epstein (1995), Kornfield (2008), and Wallace and Shapiro (2006) have presented the relationship between Buddhist thought, psychotherapy, mindfulness, and contemporary psychological practice.

There is no issue with the claim that Buddhism contains psychological insights. The issue is whether identifying psychological values in Buddhist texts is sufficient to establish Buddhist psychology as an academic discipline. To address this issue, this paper critically reviews the methodological differences between “psychology in Buddhism” and “Buddhist psychology.”

1 Department of Philosophy and Psychology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Gangodawila, Sri Lanka. wijitha@sjp.ac.lk

2 Department of Philosophy and Psychology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Gangodawila, Sri Lanka. Meththananda@sjp.ac.lk

Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to critically examine the difference between psychology in Buddhism and Buddhist psychology, with special attention to the methodological basis.

The specific objectives are:

To emphasize the psychological values embedded in Buddhist teachings.

To critically examine the selected existing scholarly works under the heading of Buddhist Psychology

To identify the limitations of selected existing scholarly works under the heading of Buddhist Psychology

To propose a methodological basis for developing Buddhist psychology as an academic and applied field.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative critical review method. The paper is based on a critical analysis of selected literature related to Buddhist psychology and psychological interpretations of Buddhist teachings. Relevant books, journal articles, course and scholarly discussions were selected purposefully according to their relevance to the aim and objectives of the study. Special attention was given to literature that explains psychological values in Buddhist teachings.

Literature Review

Existing literature strongly supports the view that Buddhism contains important psychological insights. De Silva's *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* is one of the most influential works in this area. The book deals with mind, consciousness, behaviour, motivation, emotion, perception, and the therapeutic structure of Buddhist thought (De Silva, 2005). This work clearly shows that early Buddhist teachings can be read psychologically. However, its approach is primarily interpretative and textual. It explains psychological concepts within Buddhism rather than developing Buddhist psychology through empirical research.

Kalupahana (1987) also presents Buddhist thought as a psychological and philosophical system in his book *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*. His analysis of consciousness, causality, perception, self, and suffering demonstrates that Buddhist teachings offer a valuable understanding of human experience. Yet, this work too belongs mainly to philosophical and textual analysis. It identifies

psychological ideas in Buddhist teachings but does not fully establish a research program for testing how these ideas operate in actual human behavior.

Contemporary Buddhist psychology books, such as Brazier's *Buddhist Psychology: Liberate Your Mind, Embrace Life*, explain the practical relevance of Buddhist teachings to everyday experience, suffering, attachment, delusion, and interpersonal life (Brazier, 2003). Similarly, Epstein (1995) attempts to connect Buddhism and psychotherapy, showing that Buddhist ideas about self, desire, suffering, and awareness can enrich therapeutic practice. Kornfield (2009) presents Buddhist teachings as a guide to inner transformation, emotional healing, compassion, and wisdom. These works are valuable, but they remain focused on textual explanation, doctrinal analysis, and comparison with Western psychological theories. This creates a methodological problem as a separate discipline of Buddhist Psychology because they mainly analyze psychological ideas in Buddhist teachings; therefore, these works could be more accurately described as "psychology in Buddhism" rather than a fully developed discipline called Buddhist psychology.

A further criticism comes from Buddhist traditionalists and scholars who warn that Buddhism should not be reduced to psychology. They argue that interpreting Buddhism entirely through modern psychology may distort its original purpose. Buddhism is not merely a theory of mental health; it is a path of liberation from suffering, grounded in morality, wisdom, meditation, and insight. This criticism is important because it shows that Buddhist psychology should not remove Buddhist teachings from their religious and philosophical contexts. Therefore, it emphasizes that the selected Buddhist concepts should be carefully adopted into a psychological framework without putting Buddhism itself to modern psychological category.

At the same time, modern psychology also requires a methodological basis. In psychology and social sciences, knowledge is generally developed through systematic inquiry. Qualitative methods explore lived experience, meaning, interpretation, and subjective understanding. Quantitative methods measure constructs, test hypotheses, examine relationships among variables, and validate scales. Mixed-method research integrates both forms of data to provide a fuller understanding of complex human phenomena. Therefore, if Buddhist psychology is to become a recognized academic field, it cannot remain only at the level of textual description. It must examine how Buddhist concepts function in real life, how they influence behavior, how they affect wellbeing, and how they can be used in counselling, psychotherapy, education, community life, and mental health interventions.

Findings

The review identifies three major findings.

Buddhist teachings contain a rich psychological framework. Therefore, it is reasonable to speak of psychological values in Buddhism.

Much of the existing literature labelled as Buddhist psychology is primarily textual, philosophical, or interpretative. Such works explain the psychological meaning of Buddhist concepts

There is a methodological limitation in calling Buddhist Psychology only for textual explanations.

Buddhist psychology has to adopt research methodology in social sciences to become a separate academic discipline.

Discussion

This paper forwards that psychology in Buddhism and Buddhist psychology should be treated as two different scopes. Psychology in Buddhism refers to the psychological content found within Buddhist teachings. Its methodology is mainly textual, philosophical, interpretative, and analytical. It asks questions such as: how Buddhist teachings explain the mind, emotion, desire, self, attention, and mental cultivation, etc. These are valuable questions, but they remain within the interpretative study of Buddhist texts.

Buddhist psychology, on the other hand, should ask a further set of questions: How do Buddhist psychological concepts operate in real human life? Can they be measured? Can they predict well-being, mental health, moral behavior, resilience, or life satisfaction? Can they be applied in psychotherapy, counselling, education, rehabilitation, or community development? Can Buddhist-based interventions be empirically evaluated? These questions require a social science methodology.

This distinction helps to avoid two arguments. The first one is the claim that Buddhism is already a psychology. This view ignores the methodological basis of modern psychology. The second argument is that Buddhism can't be present in a form of psychology. This view ignores the obvious psychological depth of Buddhist teachings. A balanced position is that Buddhism contains psychological insights, but Buddhist psychology as a discipline must be methodologically developed.

Therefore, Buddhist psychology should be constructed through a multi-level approach. The first level is textual and conceptual analysis, where Buddhist concepts are carefully identified from canonical and commentarial sources. The second level is theoretical development, where these concepts are translated into psychological constructs. The third level is empirical investigation, where qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are used. The fourth level is applied practice, where Buddhist psychological principles are tested in counselling, psychotherapy, education, wellbeing programs, and social interventions.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed that the distinction between psychology in Buddhism and Buddhist psychology is methodologically important. Psychology in Buddhism refers to the psychological values, concepts, and insights embedded in Buddhist teachings. It is mainly based on textual, philosophical, and analytical interpretation. Buddhist psychology, however, should be understood as a developing academic and applied field that studies Buddhist psychological concepts through systematic social scientific methods.

The paper concludes that Buddhist teachings are rich in psychological value, but this alone is not sufficient to establish Buddhist psychology as a separate discipline. Buddhist psychology should be built upon psychology in Buddhism, but it must go beyond textual explanation by adopting qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, experimental, clinical, and applied research approaches. Such a development would allow Buddhist psychology to become both faithful to Buddhist thought and methodologically acceptable within contemporary psychology.

Keywords - Buddhism, Buddhist Psychology, Methodology, review, psychology in Buddhism

References

- Brazier, C. (2003). *Buddhist Psychology: Liberate Your Mind, Embrace Life*. London: Robinson.
- De Silva, P. (2005). *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*. 4th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Epstein, M. (1995). *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kalupahana, D.J. (1987). *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kornfield, J. (2009). *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Wallace, B.A. and Shapiro, S.L. (2006). 'Mental balance and well-being: Building bridges between Buddhism and Western psychology', *American Psychologist*, 61(7), pp. 690–701.